

Rules of the Game

Polymorphing (Part Two)

By Skip Williams



The *Alter Self* Spell

The spell *alter self* provides the baseline for all other polymorph effects in the game. Once you understand how *alter self* works, you're well on your way to understanding how any similar effect works. Here are the essential features of the *alter self* spell:

- Personal range spell with a target entry of "you."

You can't use *alter self* to change anyone or anything other than yourself. If you have a familiar, mount, or other companion with the share spells ability, you can change both yourself and your familiar or companion. Your familiar or companion must be within 5 feet at the time of casting to receive the effect, and it stops affecting the familiar or companion if it moves farther than 5 feet away and will not affect the familiar or companion again even if it returns to you before the spell's duration expires. You choose a form for yourself and for your familiar or companion. The forms you choose don't have to be the same. In fact, in most cases, they cannot be the same because *alter self* allows the subject to assume a form of the same type as itself only (see the next point).

- The form you assume must be a creature of the same type as yours.

You can't use this spell to assume the form of an object, or of any kind of creature type other than your own. There's no limit to the subtypes you can assume, so long as the base type is the same as your own. For example if you're a human, your type and subtype is humanoid (human), so you can assume the form of any other humanoid creature, such as an orc, goblin, dwarf, or elf. Note that the monstrous humanoid type is different from the humanoid type. If you're a human, you can't use *alter self* to assume the form of a monstrous humanoid creature such as a sahuagin or minotaur.

When you share an *alter self* spell with a familiar or companion, the familiar or companion assumes a form of the same type as its own. While an animal becomes a magical beast upon becoming a familiar, such a creature must assume the form of an animal when sharing an *alter self* spell. For example, a cat familiar is a magical beast; when it shares an *alter self* spell, it assumes the form of an animal, such as a dog, a bird or a bat, not the form of a magical beast.

- You remain in your assumed form until the spell ends.

The spell is dismissible; if you are the spellcaster, you can end the spell during your turn with a standard action that does not provoke an attack of opportunity. If you share the spell with a familiar or companion, the recipient cannot dismiss the effect, though the effect still ends for the familiar or companion if it moves farther than 5 feet away from you.

- The form you assume can't have Hit Dice of more than your caster level, to a maximum of 5 Hit Dice.

A form's Hit Dice refers to its racial Hit Dice -- the Hit Dice it has before adding any class levels. See the assumed form's creature description (in the *Monster Manual* or other publication) for its Hit Dice. In some cases, the limit of 5 Hit Dice might keep you from using *alter self* to assume the form of your own kind. For example, if you're a spellcasting stone giant, you technically cannot use *alter self* to assume the form of another stone giant because stone giants have 14 Hit Dice. As an unofficial rule of thumb, you should always be able to use *alter self* to assume the form of your own kind.

- The assumed form you choose must have a size that is within one size category of your own.

Even if the form you choose falls within the spell's Hit Dice limit, its size might preclude you from assuming that form with *alter self*. If you're size Medium yourself, you can assume forms of Small, Medium, or Large size only. If you're size Small, you can assume forms of Tiny, Small, or Medium size only.

- You retain your own ability scores when in your assumed form.

You might appear strong or agile in your assumed form, but none of your ability scores change when you use the *alter self* spell.

- You retain your class and level, hit points, alignment, base attack bonus, and base save bonuses when in your assumed form.

You're still your same old self -- just in body that has changed superficially. Though not specifically mentioned in the *alter self* spell description, you also retain everything else that your class and level gives you, including skill ranks and feats.

- You retain the supernatural and spell-like special attacks and qualities of your normal form, except for those requiring a body part that the new form does not have.

As noted in Part One, you lose breath weapons if the assumed form doesn't have a mouth, and you lose gaze attacks if your assumed form doesn't have eyes.

- You retain all extraordinary special attacks and qualities derived from class levels.

As noted in Part One, extraordinary special attacks or qualities from class levels are primarily a function of the mind (you acquired them through experience and training), so you can keep right on using them when you're in an assumed form.

- You lose extraordinary special attacks and qualities not derived from class levels.

Also as noted in Part One, extraordinary special attacks and qualities are assumed to be largely a function of your body. When you change your body with the *alter self* spell, you lose the special physical adaptations that make those extraordinary special attacks and qualities.

- You retain your ability to speak if your assumed form has that ability.

Speech is a natural ability (see Part One); however speech has a mental aspect (your brain's ability to handle language) and a physical aspect (working vocal apparatus). You have to have both to speak in an assumed form. Furthermore, your assumed form must be able to speak naturally. If you assume the form of a creature that cannot speak or use language during the normal course of its life, you still lose the ability to speak. This distinction doesn't often come up with the *alter self* spell (because it doesn't let you assume a form with a type different than your own), but it can with other polymorph effects.

- You retain your spellcasting abilities, but your assumed form might limit what you can do.

You can use spells with verbal components only if you have retained the ability to speak. You can use somatic and material components only if your assumed form has limbs capable of dealing with them.

- You have the physical qualities of the assumed form.

Physical qualities include natural size, mundane movement capabilities (such as burrowing, climbing, walking, swimming, and flight with wings). Physical qualities also include natural armor bonus, natural weapons (such as claws, bite, and so on), racial skill bonuses, racial bonus feats, and any gross physical qualities (presence or absence of wings, number of extremities, and so forth).

Your size becomes the same as a typical example of the creature whose form you assume, as noted in the creature's description. You cannot assume a larger or smaller size even if the creature's advancement entry lists other possible sizes. If for example, you change into a lizardfolk, you become Medium size -- you could not turn into a Small or Large lizardfolk.

Your maximum speed in any assumed form, however, is 120 feet for flying or 60 feet for nonflying movement; faster speeds are considered extraordinary qualities, even when they are not so listed in the creature's description. In most cases, racial skill bonuses depend on your body and your mind. So, you get to keep your own racial skill bonuses and feats while gaining those of your assumed form. Your DM might want to make certain exceptions. (For example, a dwarf's skill bonuses related to stonework are arguably cultural in origin and don't just appear when you're in dwarf form.)

- A body with extra limbs does not allow you to make more attacks (or more advantageous two-weapon attacks) than normal.

Many DMs and players find this rule puzzling. Essentially, it means that if you suddenly find yourself with two extra arms you can't just pick up four weapons and wade into melee, use a four-handed weapon, fire and reload a heavy crossbow (even a repeating heavy crossbow) in the same round, or perform any other combat tricks that come to mind. You can make attacks that are "normal" for you or normal for your assumed form, but you can't combine them.

- You do not gain any extraordinary special attacks or special qualities not noted above under physical qualities, such as darkvision, low-light vision, blindsense, blindsight, fast healing, regeneration, scent, and so forth.

Your new body might look and feel like the genuine article, but it's not the genuine article.

- You do not gain any supernatural special attacks, special qualities, or spell-like abilities of the new form. Your creature type and subtype (if any) remain the same regardless of your new form.

By and large, you remain yourself, but you occupy a slightly different body.

- You cannot take the form of any creature with a template, even if that template doesn't change the creature type or subtype.

When you choose a form to assume, you're limited to a typical specimen of that form.

- You can freely designate the new form's minor physical qualities (such as hair color, hair texture, and skin color) within the normal ranges for a creature of that kind. The new form's significant

physical qualities (such as height, weight, and gender) are also under your control, but they must fall within the norms for the new form's kind. As a rule of thumb you can vary the assumed form's weight or dimensions up or down by 10% unless a greater variation is allowed among typical specimens. For example, if you assume the form of an elf or halfling, you can choose any height allowed on Table 6-6 in the *Player's Handbook*.

- You are effectively disguised as an average member of the new form's race. If you use this spell to create a disguise, you get a +10 bonus on your Disguise check.

To any casual viewer, you are a typical specimen of the kind of creature whose form you have assumed. If someone is paying close attention to you, the character can attempt a Spot check to note something odd about your appearance, as noted in the description of the Disguise skill. Use the +10 modifier on your Disguise check rather than the modifiers shown on the first table in the skill description. The Disguise check you make reflects how accurately you have reproduced your assumed form. If you use *alter self* to masquerade as a particular individual, anyone studying you might also get a Spot bonus as noted in the Disguise skill description.

- When the change occurs, your equipment, if any, either remains worn or held by the new form (if it is capable of wearing or holding the item), or melds into the new form and becomes nonfunctional.

Since *alter self* allows you to assume forms only with a type the same as your own, you usually can count on keeping your equipment functioning. If a piece of your equipment winds up subsumed into your new form, it's temporarily nonfunctional, but it's unharmed. When you revert to your true form, any objects previously melded into the new form reappear in the same location on your body they previously occupied and are once again functional. Any new items you wore in the assumed form and can't wear in your normal form fall off and land at your feet; any that you could wear in either form or carry in a body part common to both forms at the time of reversion are still held in the same way. Any part of the body or piece of equipment that is separated from the whole reverts to its true form.

An *Alter Self* Example

Anlion, a half-elf sorcerer, uses *alter self* to assume the form of a lizardfolk. In his normal form, Anlion has the following statistics:

Anlion (Normal Form): Male half-elf sorcerer 4; CR 4; Medium humanoid; HD 4d4; hp 10; Init +2; Spd 30 ft.; AC 13, touch 12, flat-footed 11; Base Atk +2; Grp +1; Atk +1 melee (1d6-1, quarterstaff) or +5 ranged (1d8/19-20, masterwork light crossbow); Full Atk +1 melee (1d6-1, quarterstaff) or +5 ranged (1d8/19-20, masterwork light crossbow); SQ half-elf traits, low-light vision; AL N; SV Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +5; Str 8, Dex 14, Con 11, Int 12, Wis 10, Cha 16.

Skills and Feats: Concentration +7, Diplomacy +5, Gather Information +5, Knowledge (arcana) +8, Listen +1, Search +2, Spellcraft +10, Spot +1; Dodge, Extend Spell.

Half-Elf Traits: Anlion is immune to magic sleep spells and effects, and he has elven blood (for all effects related to race, he is considered an elf). Anlion also has a +2 racial bonus on saves against enchantment spells or effects, a +1 racial bonus on Listen, Spot, and Search checks, and a +2 racial bonus on Diplomacy and Gather Information checks (already figured into the statistics given above).

Sorcerer Spells Known (6/7/4; save DC 13 + spell level): 0 -- *daze*, *detect magic*, *flare*, *mage hand*,

prestidigitation, resistance; 1st -- burning hands, color spray, magic missile; 2nd -- alter self.

Possessions: Bracers of armor +1, cloak of resistance +1, quarterstaff, masterwork light crossbow, 10 bolts, potion of cure moderate wounds, potion of protection from elements, 2 scrolls of eagle's splendor, scroll of protection from arrows, scroll of scorching ray.

In lizardfolk form, Anlion's statistics don't change much. He gains the lizardfolk's natural armor, natural weaponry, and racial skill bonuses. He loses his low-light vision (an extraordinary special quality). He retains his half-elf racial skill bonuses. He also gains the lizardfolk's racial skill bonuses to Balance, Jump, and Swim checks, and the lizardfolk's natural ability to hold its breath. His equipment keeps functioning in his assumed form, as is usually the case with *alter self*.

Anlion (Lizardfolk Form): Male half-elf sorcerer 4; CR 4; Medium humanoid (half-elf, reptilian); HD 4d4; hp 10; Init +2; Spd 30 ft.; AC 18, touch 12, flat-footed 16; Base Atk +2; Grp +1; Atk +1 melee (1d4-1, claw) or +1 melee (1d6-1, quarterstaff) or +5 ranged (1d8/19-20, masterwork light crossbow); Full Atk +1 melee (1d4-1, 2 claws) and -4 melee (1d4-1 bite), or +1 melee (1d6-1, quarterstaff) and -4 melee (1d4-1 bite), or +5 ranged (1d8/19-20, masterwork light crossbow); SQ half-elf traits, hold breath, low-light vision; AL N; SV Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +5; Str 8, Dex 14, Con 11, Int 12, Wis 10, Cha 16.

Skills and Feats: Balance +6, Concentration +7, Diplomacy +5, Gather Information +5, Jump +3, Knowledge (arcana) +8, Listen +1, Search +2, Spellcraft +10, Spot +1, Swim +3; Dodge, Extend Spell.

Half-Elf Traits: Anlion is immune to magic sleep spells and effects, and he has elven blood (for all effects related to race, he is considered an elf). Anlion also has a +2 racial bonus on saves against enchantment spells or effects, a +1 racial bonus on Listen, Spot, and Search checks, and a +2 racial bonus on Diplomacy and Gather Information checks (already figured into the statistics given above).

Hold Breath: In this form, Anlion can hold his breath for 44 rounds before he risks drowning. (This is a natural ability for a lizardfolk.)

Sorcerer Spells Known (6/7/4; save DC 13 + spell level): 0 -- *daze, detect magic, flare, mage hand, prestidigitation, resistance; 1st -- burning hands, color spray, magic missile; 2nd -- alter self.*

Possessions: Bracers of armor +1, cloak of resistance +1, quarterstaff, masterwork light crossbow, 10 bolts, potion of cure moderate wounds, potion of protection from elements, 2 scrolls of eagle's splendor, scroll of protection from arrows, scroll of scorching ray.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and has been the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* since 1986. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (his borscht gets rave reviews).

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